

Regional Conflicts with Strategic Consequences

by M. Elaine Bunn, David E. Mosher, and Richard D. Sokolsky

Key Points

During the Cold War, strategic capabilities were synonymous with nuclear capabilities, and U.S. strategic planning focused on nuclear deterrence and response against a single adversary. Today, more potential enemies are developing asymmetric capabilities to inhibit or prevent U.S. military intervention in regional conflicts—in short, to wage strategic warfare by implicitly or explicitly threatening high-value political, military, or economic targets with weapons of mass destruction and disruption. U.S. security over the next several decades will depend increasingly on the ability to deter and respond effectively to strategic regional conflicts with significant escalation potential.

The Department of Defense faces the task of ensuring that a comprehensive set of responses is developed for the National Command Authorities and is incorporated into planning before a conflict begins.

To meet this challenge, the defense establishment should analyze requirements for deterring and combating strategic warfare in regional conflicts, identify shortcomings in plans and capabilities, and develop solutions.

Providing a broad mix of military options could require changes in operational concepts, contingency planning, training, and resource allocation. The effort will require significant input from all the relevant commands and force providers, as well as the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff, services, and other agencies.

The strategic environment facing the United States has changed radically in the past decade. The United States needs to reexamine traditional ways of planning for the use of military force in conflicts that threaten vital interests and that could escalate to the highest levels of violence. Several characteristics define the new environment:

- Changed relationships between the major powers. The bipolar world of the Cold War has yielded to U.S. preeminence in virtually every facet of power, while Russia has become a second-tier power. China now has the seventh largest economy in the world and is modernizing both its conventional and nuclear forces—though it is unlikely to replace the former Soviet Union as the second pole in a reconfigured bipolar world.

- The rise of regional powers, such as Iraq and Iran. These aspiring regional hegemons are unhappy with a status quo that is preserved by American military power. The end of bipolarity has brought this antagonism to the fore. During the Cold War, regional conflicts played out within the context of the broader ideological and strategic conflict between the two superpowers, which also tamped down pressures for escalation and proliferation for fear that conflict would spiral out of control. That all ended with the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet empire made it impossible for Russia to continue supporting its allies abroad, who were forced to become responsible for their own security.

- The possibility that smaller rogue states might try to keep the United States out of a regional conflict. By credibly threatening that the fight could escalate and even involve homeland attacks on the United States or its partners,

a regional pariah might hope to prevent the United States from committing forces to the conflict or hinder it from building coalitions with European and regional allies. Failing that, a regional adversary could seek to delay and disrupt U.S. deployments to the theater and hamper operations. Finally, the leadership of a rogue state may be able to preserve its regime even in defeat if it could strike the American homeland or American allies. In short, regional powers are developing the capability to conduct strategic warfare against the United States. The importance these countries place on asymmetric warfare probably has been encouraged by the American distaste for wartime casualties and worries about self-deterrence.

Planning Challenges

In the changing environment, the United States must transform its thinking about deterring and defeating attempts to use strategic warfare to force it to abandon the defense of its vital interests in regional conflicts. During the Cold War, planning for strategic warfare became synonymous with U.S.-Soviet nuclear warfare for the simple reason that it was difficult to envision large-scale, conventional warfare between the two superpowers that did not quickly escalate to the use of nuclear weapons. This is no longer the case. Thus, the United States must rethink its plans, capabilities, and procedures for responding to the challenge of strategic warfare in the broadest sense. In other words, about whom is the United States worried strategically, what is it worried they will do, and how does it deter or deal with those actions?

Defense planners must consider a broader range of countries that are potential strategic adversaries, and deterrence must be tailored to specific countries. In addition, within each country, understanding the power structure of any regime will be important in knowing whom is to be deterred. The elements of state control may include not only the national leader or leaders, but also the military and elites.

Planners face a second question: what does the United States want to deter a country from doing? Offensive actions can range from information operations through conventional, chemical, and biological attacks to nuclear strikes. Moreover, there are gradations within each category; for example, nuisance attacks against government computers would have serious consequences, but large numbers of fatalities caused by disrupting the air traffic control system would have far greater significance.

The third question is more difficult to answer definitively: by what means does the United States deter an action against itself or an ally? The goal of deterrence is to prevent aggression by ensuring that, in the mind of a potential aggressor, the risks of aggression outweigh the gains. During the Cold War, the U.S. doctrine of deterrence was offensive dominant and focused on increasing potential risks to aggressors by threatening (or holding at risk) targets they valued, particularly with nuclear weapons. These targets included conventional and nuclear forces, defenses, chemical and biological weapons, leadership, critical infrastructure, and economic targets. In the future security environment, the United States will need to broaden its conception of deterrence to include defensive means designed to persuade a potential adversary that the likelihood of success is too low to make an attack worth the price of certain retaliation against highly valued assets.

Indeed, over the next 10 to 20 years, the United States will be able to choose from a larger, more flexible menu of offensive and defensive military options to shape an adversary's calculations of risks and gains. In past regional conflicts, U.S. forces employed capabilities usually regarded as strategic, such as B-2s and B-52s, not to dissuade escalatory

strikes against U.S. targets outside the theater of operations, but to achieve specific operational objectives. This range of strategic capabilities could include not only nuclear weapons but also defenses against missiles and other means of delivering weapons of mass destruction (WMD), precision-guided conventional weapons, offensive and defensive information warfare, air defense, passive defense, special operations, space operations, nonkinetic weapons such as lasers, and intelligence,

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surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities. These capabilities could be combined in any number of ways to deter potential adversaries from threatening or using strategic warfare to affect not only plans and operations, but also U.S. objectives and calculations of its interests. If deterrence fails, many of these tools could also be employed to manage the escalatory process so as to preserve U.S. objectives at the lowest possible level of conflict.

Improving Capabilities

The transition to a formalized process for thinking about employing military capabilities in strategic regional conflicts has been slow and is far from complete. One reason for the delay is that military structures developed to deter the former Soviet Union created organizational stovepipes that impede adaptation to the new strategic environment. Any new approaches to the asymmetric threat will have to cut across these structures. To overcome these impediments and develop an integrated approach to planning for future strategic regional conflicts, the national security community should institute a formal process that

injects these issues into exercises and war planning. This effort should reengineer U.S. plans and capabilities for regional conflicts with significant escalation potential and provide as many options as possible to the National Command Authorities (NCA) to facilitate effective decisionmaking in these contingencies. Specifically, this process should have three goals—defining requirements, identifying shortfalls, and implementing solutions:

Defining Requirements. The first step to improving U.S. capabilities would be to carefully consider the range of strategic regional situations the United States may face and how it would deter or respond to strategic warfare. That planning should be done in advance because U.S. civilian and military leaders are likely to have little time to consider their responses during a crisis. Advance planning would also permit the United States to develop a careful strategy for signaling its intentions if the homeland, allies, or forces are attacked by WMD, cyberweapons, or space weapons. Moreover, planners need to think through force-employment options and operational concepts for all phases of a crisis: regional enemies are likely to start engaging in strategic warfare before the crisis begins and continue through conflict termination. Planners must ask themselves several important questions: At what point in the conflict might different force packages be most relevant or useful, and in what sequence and combination? Are any of these instruments uniquely suited to preemption or retaliation? What constraints might the NCA face, and under what types of constraints might various options be most useful? Which military options require NCA authorization? In what situations and in what phases of conflict should there be predelegated authority and standing rules of engagement?

The key challenge is to develop a repertoire of possible responses to scenarios in gray areas. For example, what would be the best response if a regional adversary used a nuclear weapon against a carrier battle group? This action clearly would cross the nuclear threshold, and yet its collateral effects would be localized and limited. Should the United States attack military forces with a nuclear weapon, or should it attack other targets with nuclear or conventional weapons? Similarly, a nuclear burst in space could have a significant effect on satellites but cause no direct casualties. How should the United States respond? Likewise, one of the most serious challenges for the

This Strategic Forum was prepared by M. Elaine Bunn, a distinguished fellow in the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) at the National Defense University, David E. Mosher, a nuclear policy analyst at RAND in Washington, and Richard D. Sokolsky, a visiting fellow in INSS. Please address any questions or comments to Ms. Bunn at (202) 685-2366 or via e-mail at bunne@ndu.edu.

United States is developing credible responses to chemical and biological weapon (CBW) attacks. A biological attack against an American city could evoke a nuclear response. But what about a biological attack that destroys the agricultural sector of an ally in the region, or one that kills scores of U.S. troops? How should the United States respond to a chemical weapon attack against a key military installation on American soil? Moreover, responses depend not only on the type of attack but also on the result. If a biological attack against a city in the United States or an allied nation produced only a handful of casualties, the response might be very different from one that killed tens of thousands. Geographic and regional constraints are also will condition the choices leaders are willing to make. These gray areas put maximum stress on U.S. capabilities for strategic regional conflicts and thus are in most need of advance planning.

To identify possible solutions to these challenges, the widest practical range of realistic and plausible scenarios for each potential regional adversary must be developed. Defense planners obviously cannot anticipate or plan for innumerable scenarios in every region. But they can examine a range of scenarios involving different countries and different mixes of military capabilities to identify the most stressing combination of challenges and constraints for each element of the force, then optimize capabilities accordingly.

Simulation and gaming will be important tools in this endeavor, as will field experiments and exercises to test new operational techniques and to acquire the experience to use new technical solutions effectively. The games and simulations should include as diverse a group of experts as possible to develop a broad range of solutions. The participation of regional commanders in chief (CINCs)—such as those of U.S. Pacific Command and U.S. Central Command, with areas of responsibilities where strategic regional conflict may originate—as well as functional CINCs—such as those of U.S. Strategic Command, U.S. Space Command, and U.S. Joint Forces Command—will be critical to the success of this effort. Military and civilian representatives from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff, services, and other

relevant agencies should also be involved to add greater military and political realism. Because many regional conflicts could escalate to CBW use or other attacks on the U.S. homeland and thus add a domestic political dimension to U.S. planning, it will be important to include officials involved in consequence management. Regional specialists should participate to provide feedback on the diplomatic feasibility of proposed solutions and expertise on the strategic personality of each potential adversary. Wherever possible, allies and likely coalition partners also should take part to help U.S. planners understand allied constraints and concerns and spur those countries to establish their own processes for devel-

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oping effective military responses to strategic regional conflicts.

Identifying and Correcting Weaknesses. The second step is to identify the weaknesses in U.S. and allied response capabilities and develop remedies for those shortcomings.

Those shortcomings could be technical or operational in nature. In some cases, the United States may not have the technical capability to threaten a particular type of target, or operational constraints may preclude using an effective weapon. Some shortcomings may be common to many different scenarios in several different parts of the world; others may be unique to a specific threat or scenario.

Once weaknesses have been identified, the process of devising remedies would begin. Addressing a weakness might involve developing a new technology or system. Or it could simply require turning a technology that may exist in a laboratory or in the commercial world into a useful military tool. New operational approaches might also solve some shortcomings, as might new ways to organize planning and operations to make better use of existing capabilities. Correcting some weaknesses might involve creating new types of specialized forces or giving existing units new tools and training to deal with specific strategic warfare challenges. In some cases, the solution might even be to make changes in U.S. declaratory policy.

Moreover, wherever possible, developing more than one solution to a problem will be useful. It will help improve the flexibility of decisionmakers and operators and contribute to the goal of providing commanders and the NCA the broadest possible menu of strategic response capabilities. Indeed, having several possible solutions could be essential for addressing particularly thorny problems for which no good

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solution exists; in those cases, innovative approaches should be encouraged. Once possible solutions to U.S. weaknesses have been identified, their potential effectiveness should be analyzed and vetted using games, simulations, and exercises. The effort to develop solutions should focus on the areas with the highest payoff—either because the solution will be relatively straightforward, apply in many scenarios, or meet a critical need, or because potential resource constraints must be considered. Some deficiencies could be extremely difficult to overcome for technical or political reasons. But even if planners cannot always craft effective solutions, understanding weaknesses will help them develop ways of deterring or mitigating the effectiveness of certain types of attacks.

Implementing Solutions. The third goal should be to develop the appropriate plans and structures to increase military flexibility to respond and, by extension, to maximize NCA choices when a decision must be made. Thinking across traditional stovepipes will be critical. Regional CINCs still have responsibility for planning and executing the conventional campaign and theater nuclear operations. U.S. Strategic Command has the strategic nuclear portfolio and deals with strategic warfare, but almost exclusively in nuclear terms. The emergence of the information revolution has created a new arena for waging strategic warfare against U.S. military and economic targets. Responsibility for the computer network operations aspect of this fledgling mission resides in yet another organization, U.S. Space Command, which also has the national missile defense portfolio. Unless defense planners can devise a way to cut across organizational stovepipes, their ability to develop capabilities to deter or respond to strategic warfare aimed at the United States and its allies will be hindered.

A few recent organizational innovations have the potential to accelerate the transition process, if preparing for strategic regional conflicts became an explicit part of the mission of certain organizations. For example, the joint concept development and experimentation mission of U.S. Joint Forces Command would make the command a useful laboratory for innovation and testing of new operational concepts. Similarly, assigning responsibility for computer network operations to a functional CINC, in this case U.S. Space Command, should give greater visibility to the problem of preparing for strategic information operations. However, the potential of those

organizations to help defeat the strategic warfare threat will not be fully realized unless their particular talents and skills can be harnessed and focused on the issue in concert with those of other relevant organizations. One way to do this would be to establish a formalized process for developing responses to strategic warfare that reaches across the command and planning structures of the commands and the Joint Staff. Another option would be to break down the stovepipes or at

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least create some avenues for regular working-level coordination and planning.

Who should have responsibility and control of the planning process for strategic regional conflicts? Ultimately, the Pentagon must present the NCA with options; hence, the responsibility falls on them. Clearly, regional CINCs are responsible for developing war plans for their areas of responsibility. But they are unable to address the elements of operational plans that deal with threats that transcend their regions and extend to the United States or its potential coalition partners. Some of those elements would fall under the functional CINCs; however, none of those functional commands can do it alone because they are responsible for only a piece of the problem. Therefore, planning for strategic regional conflict must be coordinated at a higher level with significant contributions from all of the relevant commands and force providers. Moreover, developing cost-effective

solutions to this vexing problem will require innovation and creativity that can only come with frequent contacts among regional and functional commands and the research and development community.

The conduct of strategic warfare by regional adversaries will become an important feature of the international environment. A growing number of states are developing strategic capabilities to deter the United States from entering into conflicts where American interests, commitments to friends and allies, or both would otherwise dictate involvement. But the United States has not yet replaced Cold War structures, plans, and procedures that are inappropriate for today's strategic warfare. As a result, U.S. planning for this mission does not fully reflect the changed world.

The Armed Forces should work to develop integrated operational plans, capabilities, and campaign strategies to provide the NCA with the largest number of options for dealing with regional conflicts that have significant escalatory potential. The first step is to institute a comprehensive review of contingencies and capabilities for deterring and conducting this type of warfare in the emerging international environment. Such a process will focus attention on U.S. strengths and weaknesses and allow planners to develop a range of potential solutions. It will also allow planners to identify shortcomings in strategy and capabilities and potential solutions. The final step is to make the changes that are necessary to adapt the Armed Forces to the needs of strategic regional conflicts. The entire process should be repeated every few years to ensure that it becomes a permanent part of planning in the Department of Defense. The United States will only be able to realize its full potential for this military mission by rigorously reviewing its requirements, addressing its shortcomings, and adapting its plans and capabilities to meet the challenge of future strategic regional conflicts.

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